The Problem of Social Order and Morality:
Comparing the views of Erving Goffman and Niklas Luhmann

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"Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of difference, to construct a centre"
(Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 112)

Only a few steps away from entering the twenty-first century, sociology seems to be firmly set on a safe and self-programmed course to exotic and distant planets known as Scientific Maturity, Professional Autonomy, and Intellectual Stardom. Witnessing this flight from the inside, however, we get the distinct impression that the nature of the craft itself seems to be increasingly difficult to describe. Using a different language game, we could say that, as insiders, we experience increasing difficulties in observing the growing complexity of the conceptual landscape of sociology. What is 'really' happening during this intergalactical flight is something only future historians will be able to determine 'once and for all', after close analysis of the information gathered on the 'black box' of this strange craft. These and similar problems have not prevented sociologists from charting the 'Frontiers of Social theory' and observing 'New Syntheses' almost everywhere in an attempt to reduce the theoretical complexity of the discipline to its micro-macro form (Ritzer, 1990). As passengers however, we do not feel that we are in the best of positions to engage in such an endeavour. To chart this sociological enterprise and to arbitrate on its trials and tribulations would be to take on issues that vastly exceed the limits we have placed upon ourselves here.

So, instead of presenting a reliable roadmap to facilitate safe travel we should like to set up a rather different, probably less safe, possibly less exotic, but none the less equally fantastic project of observing how sociologists observe the unity of their discipline and each other. We intend to investigate how they try to cope with the tantalizing experience of conceptual complexity. Obviously, we can present only one, rather short case to

illustrate the intention of this unfinished project. So, we decided to take a closer look at one of the more popular strategies of reducing complexity (hence creating order) available today, i.e. the political reading of sociological communication (progressive/conservative). For theory-strategic reasons, we decided to observe how Erving Goffman and Niklas Luhmann are observed by several fellow sociologists as being overly conservative and ideological figures in an otherwise progressive and scientific discipline. We will try to indicate how this bears on the way Goffman and Luhmann conceptualize the problem of social order and especially their views on morality, and how this is misunderstood in the 'conservative-uncritical' reading of their work. On the contrary, our interpretation of both Goffman and Luhmann stresses the 'progressive-critical' character of their perspectives.

1. Erving Goffman: the interaction order as a moral order

> "Of course, it can be argued that to focus on the nature of personal experiencing - ... - is itself a standpoint with marked political implications, and that these are conservative ones. I think that this is true. I can only suggest that he who would combat false consciousness and awaken people to their true interests has much to do, because the sleep is very deep. And I do not intend here to present a lullaby but merely to sneak in and watch the way the people snore" (Goffman, 1974: 13-14)

The above quoted disclaimer of Goffman (1974) in the opening pages of *Frame Analysis* seems to have misled several of his commentators into actually believing him. Thomas G. Miller

(1984: 141 - our emphasis) states in the same line, first that 'Goffman's sociological perspective *misrepresents* certain cases of moral behavior in a fundamental way', and then goes on to make the bold claim that the dramaturgical perspective makes the moral dimension of social action totally '*invisible*'. In an attempt to downplay the cynical reputation of Goffman, mostly based on his *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Phil Manning (1989) actually undermines his own goal by acknowledging that this reading is at least partially correct. And even the otherwise well-documented Jürgen Habermas (1984: 90-94) depicts Goffman in only a few pages as an uncritical cynic focusing on the strategic self interests of individual actors, thereby forgetting the communicative, rational, and morally respectable part of social interaction. Do we have to conclude that Goffman indeed neglected to study the moral side of life ? And if so, does this necessarily turn his perspective into the conservative and uncritical sociology as suggested both in the noted literature and in Goffman's disclaimer in *Frame Analysis* ?

Erving Goffman does not often use concepts such as social order or social system, and his contribution to social theory is linked by himself and others mainly to the idea of an *interaction order* (see e.g. Burns, 1982: 17-47; Drew and Wootton, 1988), which "can be identified narrowly as that which uniquely transpires in social situations, that is, environments in which two or more individuals are physically in one another's response presence" (Goffman, 1983: 2). This emergent phenomenon derives its order from constraints imposed by the needs of a presentational self rather than by social structure. The fact that persons must commit themselves to the ground rules of interaction in order to maintain their selves is treated by Goffman as a **moral**, not a structural imperative.

Goffman (1967, 1983) rejects the familiar view that individuals and social structure are separate and competing entities. His notion of a self which depends for its existence on an order of

interaction which is constrained by this dependence allows him to argue for the recognition of interaction as a separate domain of action which needs to be studied in its own right. In short, individual and structure are not conceptualized by Goffman as competing entities, but as the joint products of an interaction order sui generis. He does not start as usual from social structure and individuals who are supposed to conform to or to resist this structure. He rather begins with those settings, commitments, and understandings which allow agents and social structures to have a social presence in the first place: "...what I'm doing is the structural social psychology that is required, or is natural for sociology. That is, given sociology is a central thrust, what can we say about the individual ? Not that the individual is the central unit that permits us to study society; but if you take society as the basic and substantive unit, you can still ask yourself the question - given social organization as the central reality - what is it about individuals, what is it we have to assume about individuals, so that they can be used or be usable socially ?" (Verhoeven, 1993: 322-323). It is quite obvious that according to Goffman (1959: 253), the social self is a dramaturgical product of social interaction. The self is therefore not the ontological starting point for a theory of social order. For Goffman (1967: 45) it is an end product, the existence of which depends upon a presentation order which is the primary constraint of situations of co-presence: "... a kind of construct, built up not from inner psychic propensities but from moral rules that are impressed upon him from without". In sum the interaction order has an existence independent of either structures or individuals.

The claim that interaction has an orderly and moral character rests for Goffman on the assumption that selves have a ritual nature, and that face-to-face interaction is organized along the protection of selves during interaction, and the protection of the interaction order from self interest. "One's face then, is a sacred thing, and the expressive order required to sustain it

is therefore a ritual one" (Goffman, 1967: 19). For Goffman contractual obligations are generated by the requirements of social interaction and the reproduction of the self through its relations to other selves in interaction. He refers to this level of agreement as a '**working consensus**' (Goffman, 1959: 10) and states that where there is 'order', there must be a working consensus. Therefore, all meaningful relationships of co-presence are characterized by this underlying consensus. For Goffman, there does not appear to be any meaningful relationship where there is not a tacit pledge of some sort: when the 'working consensus' is violated, interaction collapses (Goffman, 1967). It is therefore, not only **moral**, but also prudent to act in accordance with the working consensus because violating it would upset the interaction upon which the maintenance of 'self' depends... The 'involvement obligations' which interactants have to the interaction per se, appear to delineate a distinct domain of social and moral action for Goffman. He finds that a moral commitment to the working consensus for its own sake is one of the 'ground rules of interaction' (Goffman, 1967: 24).

Issues of **morality** remain a central underlying feature of Goffman's later work, as evidenced in his Presidential Address (1983), but also in *Frame Analysis*. Although the moral actor is not deprived of any importance (1974: 188, 193), Goffman seems to be much more interested in the structural background of moral behaviour than in its substance. Throughout this study, one finds discussions of social activities like demonstrations, benign and exploitative fabrications, pornography, misframing, breaking the frames, deviant behaviour, etc. (1974: 73, 87-111, 203, 278, 324-337, 350, 375), but not once does Goffman even wonder whether the activity itself is morally good or bad. As a sociologist, Goffman wants to show how we organize our experiences, and the social organization of moral frames is not the exception that confirms the rule...

2. Niklas Luhmann: social autopoiesis and the code of the moral

We assume that posing the question of the critical potential of systems theory, whether it be in Luhmann's version or not, may come as even more a surprise than the case of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical sociology. After the demise of Parsonian systems theory we have all stumbled on those criticisms that seek to convince us of the conservative, ideological character of this perspective. Considering the frequency and simplicity with which these and similar objections circulate throughout the sociological discipline, finding their way into numerous textbooks, the job seems highly succesful. Doing a functionalist analysis of this critique of functionalism, Herminio Martins (1974: 247) shows how "...functionalism dies every year, every Autumn Term, being ritually executed for introductory teaching purposes, its life-cycle somewhat resembling the gods of the ancient Near East. The critique of functionalist sociological theory is ... a pedagogic necessity: the demolition of functionalism is almost an initiation rite of passage into sociological adulthood or at least adolescence." So, it is no surprise that Niklas Luhmann has had his share of similar criticism. Since the early seventies, he has been regularly presented as giving uncritical descriptions, even apologetic legitimations of social relations. These uncritical readings of Niklas Luhmann's work over the years have probably been very much influenced by Habermas's (1985: 432) negative categorisation of him as an affirmative theorist "who lacks any reference point for a critique of modernity." Luhmann's (1991b) recent necrology of critical sociology - both critical rationalism and the Frankfurt style critical theory - has probably even confirmed this image (Maetens, 1994).

Luhmann (1984: 173-177) dismisses the notion of a culturally pre-established and taken-for-granted social order, which is at the centre of most mainstream solutions to the problem of order. In

his view the sociological tradition does not really solve this problem at all. According to Luhmann, sociology usually only delegates the solution to the problem of social order to the cultural system, leaving unanswered the crucial question of how general values and integrating normative commitments are possible in themselves. For Luhmann (1984: 154) '**double contingency**' means that Alter and Ego (psychic or social systems) may select communications from an infinite horizon of alternative possibilities. Alter and Ego are free to reject each other's communicative suggestions, to select alternative expectations and behaviours, not to respond at all, or (intentionally or unintentionally) to misinterpret each other's symbolic gestures. Social order does not rest on excluding misunderstanding, conflict, deviance, or disappointment but on communication systems deciding how to handle deviance, conflict and misunderstanding (Luhmann, 1984: 164). Here we reach the very core of Luhmann's autopoietic paradigm, according to which social order is possible only if Alter and Ego mutually adjust their selection patterns, if they accept each other's selections as restricting further selectivity (Luhmann, 1984: 187-190). When, for whatever reason, Alter decides to accept Ego's selection as conditioning his/her own selectivity, **emergent and self-referential processes of system-building** begin to operate. Since they are 'black boxes' for each other, Alter and Ego strenuously look for clues indicating mutual expectations; they observe that they are being observed and select gestures and behaviours in the light of expected expectations. "Auf diese Weise kann eine emergente Ordnung zustandekommen, die *bedingt ist* durch die Komplexität der sie ermöglichenden Systeme, die *aber nicht davon abhängt, daß diese Komplexität auch berechnet, auch kontrolliert werden kann*. Wir nennen diese emergente Ordnung soziales System" (Luhmann, 1984: 157).

Unlike **normativism**, Luhmann's theory design does not have to rely on problematic assumptions about factual consensus to account for the possibility of orderly interaction. Unlike **interpretivism**, Luhmann's conceptual strategy can do without mutual empathy and

cognitive transparence as solutions to the problem of order. For Luhmann, mutual understanding does not guarantee orderly interaction, since latent self-referential operations assure that personal systems are never fully understandable for each other.

Luhmann's theory of autopoietic systems entails a complete break with the 'methodological humanism' or conceptual 'homocentrism' (Lemert, 1979) that has dominated much of the sociological scene, and which even Luhmann himself once accepted as the 'natural' attitude of sociologists (Kiss, 1990). This autopoietic paradigm change does for sociology what Copernicus once did for the sciences. Just as the earth is not at the centre of the Copernican universe, human individuals, or 'psychic systems' as Luhmann prefers to say, are not at the centre of his version of the social system. In fact, Luhmann (1986) even goes further than Copernicus by locating the individual outside the social system, into its environment. We firmly believe that it is this ingenious theoretical 'move' that is responsible for the aforementioned conservative, uncritical reaction to his work, triggering similar reactions of sheer disbelief in sociology as its Copernican counterpart once did in the sciences... The vacancy that this decision to de-psychologize sociology entails, is filled by the concept of communication. Although aware of the fact that there is much more to this autopoietic communications theory that meets the eye, we decided to refrain from a highly detailed analysis of it. What interests us here is simply its theory-strategical value. In line with the autopoietic theorem noted above, communication is defined as an emergent reality, a state of affairs sui generis. Hence, it is conceived of in such a way that "every reference to consciousness or life ... is strictly avoided" (Luhmann, 1992: 252). What is new about Luhmann's concept of communication is not really the distinction of the three components of information, utterance, and understanding (1992: 252), which is also central to Shannon and Weaver's model of communication as a process of transmission (1949), the

speech act theories of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), and the typology of validity claims which Habermas develops (1979). The novelty of Luhmann's sociological concept of communication resides in the emphasis on its emergent, autopoietic and inherently social character (1992: 254). It is not disputed that the existence of communication is predicated on the existence of life, consciousness or any other 'environmental restrictions' (Luhmann, 1992: 254). However, it is assumed that the process of communication depends on the inherent laws of the communication system itself, which is ironically expressed in the aphorism "*only communication can communicate*" (Luhmann, 1992: 251).

Closing this section of our paper, we will briefly try to indicate how all this is linked with the way Luhmann conceptualy designed his notion of **morality.** Luhmanian systems theory replaces the consensus-directed entelechy with the argument that communication leads to a decision whether the uttered and understood information is to be accepted or rejected. Communication - as Luhmann sees it - bifurcates reality. "It creates two versions - a yes version and a no version - and thereby forces selection. And it is precisely in the fact that something must happen (even if this is an explicitly communicated break-off of communication) that the autopoiesis of the system resides, guaranteeing for itself its own continuability" (Luhmann, 1992: 255-256). Hence, it should not come as a surprise that Luhmann (1991: 84, 1993: 998) defines **morality** as a special form of communication which carries with it indications of approval or disapproval. "The moral is not something good. Of course, that should not lead us to say that the moral is something bad. [...] The moral functions only as a distinction" (Luhmann, 1993: 996). It is precisely this binary form of the moral distinction good/bad or good/evil that attracts Luhmann's theoretical attention. So again he uses the same tactics, and coins a concept of morality that fits his view on the problem of social order. Again he takes a functional instead of a substantial stance and defines the moral with a conceptual eye on its ability

to sustain the self-referential reproduction of communication. Again the link between morality and consensus is conceptually removed (Luhmann, 1978: 43-62). Again morality is conceptualized in a strictly sociological fashion. In the hands of this extremely technical thinker this of course boils down to a concept that bears no reference to psychic systems. "Neither life as such, nor the functions of the brain, nor the conscious operations of perception and thinking have intrinsic moral quality. [...] The moral makes an important difference only in communication, namely, a difference in the communicative reaction to the expression of esteem or disesteem. [...] There are, in other words, no good people or bad people, but only the possibility of indicating people as good or bad" (Luhmann, 1993: 1000).

To conclude our presentation we very much want to stress that, in our view, both Goffman and Luhmann, each in his own way, open up interesting roads for the development of a sociological critique of society. Especially their **methodological or conceptual strategies** are regarded by us as very promising.

The view of Goffman as a cynic appears to depend on the bypassing of his fundamental stance taken in *Frame Analysis*, which perhaps does not offer a separate analysis of 'the moral frame', but clearly shows in a way that is theoretically useful how the social world can be seen to work. It brings to light features of the taken-for-granted world and analyzes the way in which distinctions are being made in everyday life. It also recognizes the ultimate impossibility of making absolute distinctions, both for members of society and for sociologists. Whether or not individuals manipulate the expressions they 'give' and 'give off' and the impressions they convey to others, setting the problem as an **empirical** rather than a moral one is a more promising route to sociological understanding.

A similar conclusion can be drawn in the case of Luhmann. He also is convinced of the necessity of developing a strict conceptual strategy. Expressions which society uses to describe itself do not represent the way into the formulation of a sociological theory. The methodological design of his autopoietic systems theory as a second order perspective, from which sociology observes society as a system that is observing itself, has the immediate goal of describing social reality in a completely different manner. As a controlled instrument for observing society, it tries hard to relieve itself of obligations to take action or decisions. This is no conservative concern, but on the contrary opens up perspectives which were unavailable to society itself. As such, he makes an important contribution to a sociological critique of modernity. By observing as contingent what is taken to be natural, his version of 'sociological enlightenment' seems very worthwhile. As in the case of Goffman, one of the most important strengths of Luhmann's second order theory resides in its - postmodern ? - mixing of theoretical rigour with intellectual modesty. After all, the autopoietic systems theory views itself as a method of observing society which operates with justifiable distinctions, but to which alternatives can always be developed...

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